

Mosse and Arendt: Two Perspectives on Totalitarianism and Democracy

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According to the G. Mosse, the economical and moral crisis after the Great War led to the European totalitarian regimes, because people need to be part of a great reconstruction project of their Nations. He focuses his attention especially on Italy and Germany. Moreover, Mosse criticizes Arendt about the notion of 'banality of evil', since he believes that Nazis were used to identify people with widespread stereotypes: all people who collaborated in the genocide of the Jewish were worn out by this kind of aggressive propaganda which identified the Jews as the destructive element of the German moral and political integrity. According to him, those who adhered to the Nazis party ideology did so because, at that historical moment, the propaganda's ideas met the political and cultural needs of that social crisis context: Jewish had to be killed since they were perceived as a threat. As Mosse, Arendt analyses totalitarianism and she recognizes its causes in ideology, but she also describes more in detail the kind of agent who acted during this tragic historical period. Therefore, she focuses her attention on both executioners and victims. Moreover, regarding the Nazis, Arendt speaks about the "banality of evil" in the sense that those people did not reflect on the consequences of their actions in ethical-political terms. To sum up, the aim of this paper is to highlight the value of philosophy as a discipline able to urge people to compare and critically analyse historical, social, ethical, political phenomena.

Keywords: *democracy, philosophy as a method, critical thinking*

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyse philosophically, i.e., critically and fruitfully for our modern society, how two of the most relevant 20th century thinkers about totalitarianism studied the causes and characteristics of it. The importance of comparing the interpretation of a historian such as George Mosse and that of the philosopher Hanna Arendt stems from the fact that both were fortunate enough to experience this tragic historical period, despite being of Jewish origin, because they managed to escape to France before and, finally, only partially and directly to the USA. Here, they were able to cultivate their academic careers and explore historical and political issues related to totalitarianism, while maintaining a detached, but not overly detached, view of the issues they dealt with.

Using these two authoritative sources will make possible to approach such a complex historical period full of light and shade from two interesting points of view, both analysing the commitment of such many people in one of the most tragic periods in world history (Herf 2000).

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Moreover, the two perspectives provide such a comprehensive view of totalitarianism because they combine both the historical aspects more closely related to the economic-political-social crises of the 20th century and those of a more philosophical-cultural perspective. The general conclusion to be reached through the analysis led is that analysing different sources allows the reader to acquire new information on issues one probably already knows, through different, but more critical points of view. At the same time, one person could become more accustomed to looking prospectively at a problem, so that one could think more deeply and meaningfully to some issues stimulated also by these different sources.

The choice of comparing the point of view of a historian and that of a philosopher also stems from my personal training as a teacher of Philosophy and History in Secondary school: to combine different perspectives teaches young students to develop a critical outlook on their daily lives, but more generally on social, ethical, and political issues.

Methodology and Materials

On the one hand, the analysis of some of G. Mosse's main works will show how his so-called 'politics of the squares' is rooted in the economic and values crisis of the First Post-War period, as well as the ability of the Fascist and Nazi regimes to use propaganda (Aschheim 2000). In particular, the latter succeeded in distorting the way Germans coexisted with other fellow citizens, for example those of Jewish origin, homosexuals, or disabled, turning peaceful coexistence into a regime of terror. For the analysis of Mosse's thought, some of the historical facts concerning the political, economic, and social context of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s will be presented. Basically, those will also be useful to understand the value of Nazi propaganda at that time.

On the other hand, the analysis of some of the main works of H. Arendt will show how ideology and concentration camps also led the victims themselves to behave as executioners with other people locked up in the camps. In addition, starting from Mosse's critique of Arendt's 'banality of evil', the analysis will be extended to Arendt's reflections, and these will be helpful to analyse how to prevent tragic historical moments such as totalitarianism from recurring. The concept of the 'banality of evil' was introduced by the philosopher when she wrote the report of Eichmann trial for *The New Yorker*. According to Arendt, the Nazi hierarch acted without thinking critically about the values he was putting into practice.

In conclusion, the final attempt will be made to show how Arendt's perspective is aimed at promoting a plural thought which knows how to pose respectfully towards others: in this way, it will be possible to investigate the value of a thought that can be called 'democratic', in the broad sense of being able to include different ethically correct perspectives, aimed at putting the public good into practice. Furthermore, the purpose in combining these two perspectives will be also to show the value that in-depth analyses concerning historically significant periods have for future events, especially how these will therefore be largely influenced by their cultural-political-historical roots. Starting from the most significant works of these

two thinkers, another aim of the analysis led will be to prompt the reader to observe the same period from different and multiple points of view, to enhance a certain critical capacity and plural understanding of events, namely, to improve a more philosophical way of thinking.

Discussion

The Historical Facts

In order to analyse Arendt's and Mosse's reflections more in detail, it is worth describing some of the historical facts that characterised the rise of Nazism in Germany. Let us briefly review them.

Riding on the nationalist, anti-establishment and anti-Semitic ideas, the Nazi party managed to increase its electorate up to the 35% in a very few years: thus in '33, Hitler was called to lead the government. As previously argued, the Treaty of Versailles was a real incentive for extreme right-wing nationalism, which demanded, according to the very points of the treaty, a return to the territorial and national unity taken away by the victorious countries. Especially, one refers to the division of Germany that was desired through the Danzig Corridor, the cession of Alsace and Lorraine to France, taken in 1871 with the defeat of the Franco-Prussian war and the loss of German colonies. In addition, an incentive for the growing nationalism of the 1920s was undoubtedly the economic repercussions of the huge reparations to be paid to the victorious powers, as well as the dismantling of the naval and air fleet. Furthermore, the crisis of 1929 sanctioned the moral and even political victory of the Nazi party.

The occupation of the Ruhr between '23 and '25 also led the national pride of some Germans to believe that foreign Nations were deliberately attacking the economy and autonomy of German territory. Belgium and France had occupied the richest region of West Germany leading the State to a further economic decline, without the other powers belonging to the League of Nations intervening to stop that armed operation. The occupation of the Ruhr lasted two years and ended with the Treaty of Locarno, signed in 1925 which stipulated that the borders established at Versailles were the valid ones and that war wouldn't considered as a method of solving conflicts among Nations (Vidotto and Sabatucci 2007). But it was with the crisis of 1929, started with the fall of the New York Stock Exchange, that the lifestyle of the Germans began to dramatically deteriorate and about half the population was unemployed. In addition, it should be stressed that the social-democratic Weimar Republic had never been politically stable since it was found. With this crisis, it suffered a real attack by the right political parties allied with the extreme nationalists.

Chancellor Brüning's government drastically reduced the number of people who had access to some social security measures. Promulgated in 1930 and 1931, they imposed a reduction in the wages of workers and civil servants, a reduction in aid to the unemployed, an increase in the age required to obtain this aid (from 16

to 21), the exclusion of women from entitlement to these benefits, a reduction in family allocations, and a 5% tax increase.

In 1932, the crisis reached its peak. Industrial production fell by half: half of German families had no jobs or employees who could maintain their standard of living. Hence, the adherence to the extreme wings of politics and the discontent with republican institutions increased: the number of members of the Nazi party grew to around 1.5 million. Propaganda is further promoted by the party. The Nazis hold rallies and processions in the squares. Social dissent against the Weimar Republic also grew in proportion to its inability to keep the clashes between Nazis and Communists under control. This atmosphere generates the inability to govern, so new elections were called for the President of the Republic. General Hindenburg was elected. He fought during WW1 and his candidature was proposed to prevent the election of Hitler, who nevertheless achieves the 30% support.

Due to the increasing economic and social instability, two general elections were also called. The Nazis were confirmed as the leading German party with 37% of the vote and conservative groups, particularly the army and Hindenburg, become convinced to govern with the Nazis support, so on the 30th of January of 1933, Hitler was called to head a government with only three ministries out of eleven: as it had happened in Italy with Mussolini, the German conservative parties believed they could keep Hitler under control. Their political judgement was so far from being true. Indeed, Hitler needed only a few months to settle a totalitarian state (Vidotto and Sabatucci 2007).

On the 27th of February 1933 begins the repressive clampdown with the burning of the Reichstag. A Dutch communist was accused, and this provided the government with the pretext for a massive police operation against communists. The party was outlawed, and freedom of the press and assembly were cancelled. After March 1933's elections, parliament passed the so-called 'suicide law': the government could have full powers because it would be able to legislate and amend the Constitution. This, to all intents and purposes, would have allowed the government to legislate without the consent of Parliament. The SPD was also dissolved, and, in July, the Nazi party will be the only one allowed in Germany. The Catholic Church stipulates a concordat with the Nazi government, ensuring freedom of worship and non-interference in the internal affairs of the State. Only in 1937, Pope Pius XI intervenes with an encyclical written in German, *Mit brennender Sorge*, to denounce the Nazi's ideology and practices against Jews¹: unfortunately, it was too late, by then, the regime had long since begun its discriminatory and racist policy.

¹https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_14031937_mit-brennender-sorge.html.

The Consolidation of Power

Once he became Chancellor, Hitler - in agreement with the conservative forces - obtained their support for election as the President of the Republic, if and when Hindenburg finished his term of office. Between the 29th and the 30th of June 1934, what is historically known as the 'Night of the Long Knives' took place: to consolidate his authoritarian power, Hitler had the SA assassinated by the SS. The latter was a paramilitary group at Hitler's service, sadly famous above all because their members presided over concentration camps and were guilty of crimes against the civilian population (murders, thefts, fires). After the repression of SA, Hindenburg died in August 1934, new elections were called and Hitler elected President of the Republic, which by now had turned into a full-fledged *Reich*, combining both the chancellorship and the presidency of the Republic in a single figure (Vidotto and Sabatucci 2007).

The Persecution Against the Jews and Those Who Dissent

According to Mosse, the persecution of the Jews in Germany built on the presence of a tight propaganda had already begun in the 50s-60s of the XIX century throughout Europe by certain pan-European movements such as Pan-Germanism. Mosse underlines that racism was widespread throughout Europe and not only in the German-Prussian territory, for instance, the sadly notorious case of the *Dreyfus Affair*. The French Jewish officer Dreyfus (1894-98) was charged with the accusation of treason by the French Army. The writer Émile Zola wrote an article, entitled *J'accuse*, in the newspaper *L'Aurore* bringing proof of his innocence (Mosse 2007),² but he was pardoned only by the choice of the President of the Republic and then released from prison. Despite that, he was never found innocent by the prosecution despite having never committed the crime of espionage. In Paris, when the officer was found guilty, many French people poured into the city streets shouting anti-Semite phrases: there were many rallies against Jewish people.

In Germany, the persecution of the Jews officially began with the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws (1st September of 1935), in which the criteria for defining how one person belong to the 'Aryan race' were established: if you had three or four German grandparents, you were German; if they were two, you were of mixed blood, less than two German grandparents, you did not belong to the 'Aryan race'.

Between 9th and 10th November 1938, the killing of a councillor at the German embassy in Paris by a young Jewish student triggered a series of *pogroms*³. This uprising is called 'crystal night' (*Kristallnacht*): about 270 synagogues and 7500 Jews homes were burnt down. The firemen were explicitly ordered not to intervene, except in cases where houses of Aryan Germans were threatened. According to the official Nazi police account, ninety-one Jews were killed. Many more, however, committed suicide that night or in the days immediately following. A high number

²<https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alfred-dreyfus/>.

³<https://www.ilpost.it/2013/11/09/notte-dei-cristalli-75-anni/>.

of adult males (twenty-thirty thousand) were taken to Dachau, Buchenwald and other camps that had not yet become extermination camps, but they were – for now – forced labour camps.

From this moment on, the clampdown on the Jews remaining in Germany increased: violence, confiscation of property, arrests. The Jews are considered sub-human and must be eliminated: their systematic elimination would take place from 1942 onwards, established at the Wannsee Conference, with mass deportation and murder in concentration camps (*lagers*). This conference was also attended by Eichmann, the Nazi hierarch whose trial in Jerusalem was followed by Hannah Arendt and whose account was published first in *The New Yorker*, later in her well-known work entitled *The Banality of Evil*.

Discriminatory practices in Germany also concerned the Jews' cultural productions and, more in general, all that art and culture that came from those who were not considered suitable to promote the ideal of the German Aryan man: the *Entartete Kunst* (the degenerate art) was all that art not representing the ideals of the Nazis' regime. A travelling exhibition was organised in 1937 in which Goebbels participated and in which 'degenerate' works were presented. The exhibition could be visited for free so that everyone had access to these works and could see their moral inadequacy: for instance, there were exhibited works of Jews people, political dissenters, jazz musicians.

Mosse's Reflections

Considering this brief presentation of historical facts in background, the analysis will turn to Mosse's thought about these tragic years in Europe and his reflections about how it all began.

Mosse's biography is only partially intertwined with German history of the '30s and '40s, because he managed to escape from Germany at a very young age, in 1933. He firstly found refuge in France and England, later in the US, where he had the opportunity to study and graduate. Only as an adult he become interested in studying European History, even though, the one of his family is nevertheless linked to Nazism as his grandfather had founded one of the largest publishing houses in the country. Moreover, Mosse's father was ordered to return from Paris after the family was safe, but he refused, even though he was promised that he could live in Germany with his family without being persecuted. Mosse, however, was too young - as he claims - at the time, to understand what was happening in Europe, even if, once, he took part to a rally organized by the Nazi's party. He was so caught up in what was going on that he found himself ranting against the Jews: this example, quoted by Mosse himself, shows how engaging Nazi propaganda was in Germany (Mosse 2004).

When he approached the European history of '20s and '30s, some years later, the aim of the historian was to delve deeper into the historical, economic, and cultural facts which led to the affirmation of the great European totalitarianisms (Gentile 2007). Although Mosse's reflection focuses on all of them, this discussion will only concentrate on Nazism, because it is in relation to this that Mosse

criticises Arendt for her definition of the ‘banality of evil’ and because it could be compared with her thought about racism, propaganda and concentration camp.

According to Mosse, the roots of the crisis of European institutions originated in the years just after the First World War, thanks to the Nazi party's ability to make the population feel united by myths, sagas, traditions that everyone found in their own culture (Mosse 2004, Herf 2000)⁴: a new aesthetics of politics had already begun in the 19th century but peaked with the great totalitarianisms of the 20th century (Mosse 1999). Interpreting Mosse, one could say that Nazism had succeeded in uniting the population after the collapse of the state due to the failure of the democratic policy of the Weimar Republic. Nazis had succeeded in making the unity of the German people seem like to be rooted in tradition, namely, as if it had always belonged to the people themselves (Mosse 2004). Thus, the people felt part of the political project to redeem Germany through party propaganda. At a time of crisis, Nazism had managed to give hope for the reconstruction of a shared project, namely the supremacy of the Aryans over the rest of the population.

His considerations show what led to the rise of political parties capable of extolling the lost national unity, as well as the return to traditional values, significant for the ethical formation of the younger generations. These elements were the ability of Nazis to identify what people should have perceived as licentiousness and, therefore, a crisis of moral values by people combined with the severe economic crisis due to the war (Gentile 2007). For instance, the Nazi party evoked the values of virility, of the bourgeois family with pre-established roles, against those who advocated greater freedom in interpreting these same roles.

It should be emphasised that Mosse also shows the contradictions of this type of propaganda, arguing that Nazism and early fascism wanted to precisely dismantle the bourgeois system of values. As time went on, these totalitarian parties changed their roots, since it was precisely from this class that they gained the most support. Thus, they change their previous value system into one more suited to those who supported them (Mosse 2019, Gentile 2007).

Mosse also analyses the phenomenon of Nazism starting from the propaganda ideals which the party proposed. He was very concerned in analysing the connection between racism spread all over in Europe during the XX century and the advent of a crisis, political or economic or both (Herf 2000). Furthermore, he argues in some of his works that this regime was able to make Germans feel part of a project that aimed to realise the greatness of Germany itself at the expense of those populations considered inferior as the Slavs or of those Nations that claimed its dissolution at the end of the Great War thanks to the Treaty of Versailles. This pact was perceived as a *diktat* by the nationalist fringes of the population, for example by the nascent National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), whose ranks included a young Hitler who later wrote his *Mein Kampf* in 1925. In this work, he openly declared that the victorious powers of Versailles had wanted to make German power null and void and that, therefore, the German people would have to prove their worth and strength against these traitors. That treaty is

⁴Here, Mosse deals with the role of the myth for Huizinga and the way in which these myths are implicitly bound to reality and to people.

described as shameful and repeatedly violated by the victorious Nations to the detriment of Germany: one of these violations happened with the occupation of the Ruhr by French and Belgian armies, without any power taking the side of the Germans (Hitler 1940, pp. 122, 147).

Mosse: Street Politics as a Response to the Economic Crisis

Mosse's analysis of totalitarianism deeply discusses the role which the economic crisis played in causing racism to explode in Europe, especially in those countries, Germany and Italy, where the political situation was also unstable after the end of WW1.

In his analysis of the roots of totalitarianism in Europe, Mosse identifies the moments of crisis as the moments when 'the politics of the square', as he calls the 'liturgical' politics enacted by Nazism and Fascism, was born precisely as a response to the bewilderment caused by the frequent economic-political-social crises (Mosse 2004). "Racism was the true, unique 'people's church' that would take the place of Christianity" and the racist doctrine pitted the 'beautiful Aryan' against the Jews (Mosse 2007). Totalitarianism had replaced the Christian liturgy with that of the party, so that everyone professed the same shared cult, so much so that - for example - Pope Pius XI would call fascism a 'pagan statolatry' (a definition that could also be indicative of Nazi practices)⁵. As far as Mosse is concerned, the politics of the square, tied to racism, is most effective where the feeling of bewilderment due to political instability is greatest: this was the case of Italy and Germany after the First World War⁶. This already dramatic situation has worsened due the crisis of 1929 and to a climate of distrust in liberal institutions. Mosse believes that racism was also present elsewhere, for example in France, but in more economically and politically stable countries, in his opinion, racism seems not to have become an instrument of politics to try to rebalance itself.

The great attraction of totalitarian regimes was to create a sense of stability where there was only fear of how the future would shape up. The liturgical politics of the regimes was able to restore meaning to people's lives that were framed within organised systems: a clear example, according to Mosse, is that of the new calendar introduced by Nazism and Fascism with anniversaries that were added to the Gregorian calendar. One thinks, for example, of the March on Rome in 1922, a date from which the fascist regime had begun to count the years of the new fascist era, so much so that it was planned to redevelop the EUR district for the international exhibition that was to be held in 1942 - if there had been no war - and that would have celebrated 20 years of the new fascist era. In the case of the Nazis, Mosse points out that houses in Germany during the regime could have spaces in which to find paintings or pictures of Nazi hierarchs accompanied by flowers or candles as altars. Similarly, speeches organised by Hitler were reminiscent of church services: audiences gathered in front of the führer's altar (Mosse 2014).

⁵https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/it/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310629_non-abbiamo-bisogno.html

⁶See also Gentile (2009).

Politics was transformed into a secular religion that finds salvation for the people it protects at the expense of its enemies. Mosse points also out that racism was the instrument able to help this regime in becoming a lay religion, because the Nation was united in its attempt to eliminate those who sought to undermine the integrity of the race and its shared values (Mosse 2007).

The characteristic of regimes, then, was to create unity where post-war and economic crises had created disintegration, restoring confidence to the people of nations bent by these same crises.

The Dehumanisation of People

In such a historical-political time, certain categories of people were seen as disruptive to the State, elements that had to be eliminated for the Nation to be united against the economic and political crisis. Therefore, propaganda focused on dehumanising certain groups, so those who adhered to some racist ideals would become less sensitive to their capture and murdering.

During the 30s culturally and ideologically, in Germany, the Jews were often described with dehumanising characteristics, namely they were compared, for example, to worms undermining the integrity of the German state, or without strength – like women, unlike the vigorous German man: for this kind of living being, a person could feel only disgust and repulsion (Nussbaum 2001, 2011)⁷. The undesirable was also often described as a criminal, as an individual damaging society: it is possible to refer to the propaganda of the journal *Der Stürmer*, weekly published from 1923 to 1945, which often described the Jews in its caricatures as murderers of the State, or butchers of Europe, showing them as a threat to the social and political life of the host Nations.

Exclusion from the community should be foreseen for these people precisely because they represent a constant danger to cultural unity and socio-political stability.

The dehumanisation of Jews people (as well as the one of political opponents, homosexuals, people with disabilities) was also carried out in the concentration camps: Mosse claims that, here, the SS tried to trigger behaviour that would make an imprisoned person to behave meanly towards other prisoners. This was to corroborate the idea that Jews were narrow-minded people with dubious moral values. They were not considered like decent people with a shareable or bourgeois value system, if they were fighting each other for a meagre ration of food (Mosse 2007, pp. 230–242). Moreover, the conditions under which they were transported to the camps, the fact that when they arrived there, they were got undressed and sorted like meat of slaughter, made them look like beasts to the guards. Certainly, they struggled to recognise themselves as human beings, and they weren't seen as actual people by their executioners and also by their fellows.

⁷For a more in-depth discussion of the concept of disgust in Nussbaum, see Callow (2014) and Bertolini (2016).

Arendt's Reflections

The reflection on Arendt's thought will show another way of analysing totalitarianism and will deepen and expand on the considerations proposed by Mosse. The focus will be on Nazism because the philosopher had to leave her homeland due to persecution, also because she is an important thinker who investigated this tragic historical moment in the early '50s. Lastly, because Mosse criticises her concept of the 'banality of evil', and his critique will allow us to further explore this concept. The analysis led will emphasise the importance and complementarity of the two thinkers in their critical analysis of German totalitarianism.

The concept of the banality of evil was extensively explored by Arendt in one of her main work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 2001). The publication of the Eichmann's trial report provoked her many critiques, precisely because she claims that the Nazi hierarch acted without critically thinking about what he was doing. Arendt never wanted to polarise the evil that Eichmann had committed – as it was thought, but what she did want to argue was that if he had any good moral values rooted in his conscience, he would have opposed what he was being asked to do. According to Arendt, being able to critically think implies the ability to discern the good values to put into practice while avoiding those that make other people suffering; thus, Eichmann is associated with the concept of the 'banality of evil' because he failed to deeply think about the actions he was carrying out⁸.

The analysis led will focus on two of the main aspects of Arendt's thought about the responsibility of those who act in the political realm, one concerning the executioners (e.g., the SS, Eichmann) and the other concerning the victims (the prisoners in the concentration camps who, at some point during their detention, were involved in harming their fellows, as Mosse meaningfully also highlighted).

Totalitarianism and its Consequences

A broad selection of Arendt's writings explore totalitarianism, but we will focus mainly on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 2009) and the considerations led in *Philosophy and Politics* (Arendt 1990). Regarding the former, Arendt's analysis shows that her point of view is to locate the origins of totalitarianism not in the more recent past, but to trace the phenomenon back to the Imperialism and racism that had been widespread in Europe since the 19th century. The European powers, seeking to impose their national pride, found a way to make this desire effective by focusing on the conquest of countries deemed culturally, economic, social, and political inferior, such Asia and Africa. The

⁸According to Arendt as well as for Socrates who is one of the ethical-political models she esteems more, the rational capacity with which people are endowed makes them capable of not harming others by practicing just moral values. However, it must be emphasized that this intellectualism often clashes with the real possibility that there are people who know what the right thing to do is but decide not to put it into practice.

racism of some who focused on conquering territories outside their national borders was concentrated both against those who were considered inferior, but also towards Europeans belonging to other States. Arendt points out that the Anglo-Boer War resulted in the first concentration camps used by the British to force the defeated Dutch work and lock them up: in these camps, people were completely excluded from their socio-political context and the same rights as other citizens no longer apply to them. Referring to this tragic moment in history, the philosopher shows how, already by the end of the XIX century, practices of racism and exclusion of some groups existed to make the labour and exploitation camps places where violence and terror prevailed, in which the rights reserved for other human beings were no longer respected. People in there were no more considered an essential part of the free common political realm.

The Origins of Totalitarianism shows that totalitarianism deprive a person of one of the main aspects which Arendt considers for politics, namely the value of sharing a common space so that everyone can actively participate in the political life itself. By producing alienation and isolation, totalitarianism makes people unbalance of dialoguing with each other, of finding a shared public good and consciously maturing an effective critical thinking helpful for a more democratic political action., Terror, ideology and concentration camps are means by which totalitarian regimes have obtained the consent and estrangement from public life of certain categories of people.

The former is a way of imposing the biological law of race supremacy by sacrificing individuals for the group (Arendt 2009). Totalitarianism, through terror, eliminates freedom and especially its source. This is the birth of people and what they represent, namely a new beginning, new sharable ideas, and points of view from which observe social, cultural, and political issues. It introduces objective criteria in selecting victims and executioners and prevented people from developing personal and subjective convictions.

Ideology makes this beliefs' depersonalisation possible by showing what totalitarianism sees as the true meaning of history, namely that the best survives all others. People's actions, therefore – even the most terrible – are justified with a view to this goal. Thus, the subjects of the totalitarian regime go so far as to sacrifice other individuals or be sacrificed in their turn according to the supposed selective law of history (Arendt 2009).

Terror and ideology are two sides of the same coin: if people do not have a deep-rooted and just value system, they will be inclined to commit ignominious acts. They will justify these actions out of fear of being killed and may even turn into the worst executioners.

Concentration camps are the realisation into practice of the logic of terror: they are what allowed the elimination of people spontaneity and of their credibility.

Concentration Camps and Their Role in Totalitarianism

The horror of the camps is unimaginable, so no one would be willing to believe what the victims recounted once they were liberated. So that, the experience of the camps remains untold, namely everything that happened inside the concentration camps is unbelievable: this general disbelief about what happened isolates who lived in them in such extreme condition (Arendt 2009). Therefore, those who went through this same experience will feel cut off from the human common space and will not feel understood by those who did not share the same situations. As far as Arendt is concerned, this incommunicability of experiences prevents people from sharing the same ethical-political space, which also creates isolation and separation between people. But, in Arendt's view, the possibility to interact with people is what can contribute to the improvement of the shared public realm. By making people strangers to each other and by making their experience incommunicable, concentration camps prevent dialogue and iteration between free people.

Furthermore, the violence perpetrated within the camps turns the victims into executioners: the individual seems to be no longer master of his own conscience, as happens when some internees are forced to commit crimes against other prisoners and do not rebel against the demand. Moreover, in there, the uniqueness of each person is annihilated: this happens on several times, for example, when people are crammed into trains naked, clinging together; on arrival at the camp, when everyone is shaved; during their stay, when they are slowly worn down by unimaginable torture (Arendt 2009). Concentration camps radically separate people from the public shared space, that space within which, by acting, one becomes socially and politically visible. They radically eliminate the possibility of new beginnings and changes for political life.

Arendt's analysis focuses on both the SS and the prisoners living within alienating logics which led them to act in unexpected ways. The former, the so-called executioners, act as Arendt describes in *The Banality of Evil* (Arendt 2001), i.e., without questioning the moral and political principles imposed by Nazism. They accept them feeling gratified by being involved in the logic of the State power. This is Eichmann's case, who is described by the philosopher as a person incapable of criticising the value system imparted to him. With regard to the figure of Eichmann, it should not be forgotten that, at the time of its publication, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 2001) aroused quite a bit of controversy both within the public discussion and within Arendt's friends because of the definition of 'banal evil' she proposed: this was often misunderstood and interpreted as a trivialisation of what happened in the Nazi era (Arendt 2009, Young-Bruehl 2006). Mosse was also very critical of Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil' because he believed that the people involved in the regime's criminal actions acted because they were convinced of what they were doing precisely because the propaganda system had shown them that these individuals were detrimental to the economic-socio-political growth of the Nation (Gentile 2007). People were educated, they were accustomed to seeing images, to hearing slogans that recalled the unity of the race, the greatness lost through mixing with people of other ethnicities and that

reminded them that Germany's greatness depended on the ability of its people to remain united (Mosse 2004). By attributing this role to propaganda, Mosse would like to emphasise that those who acted were deeply responsible for what they did while being equally deeply influenced by the propaganda promoted by the regime.

Unlike what emerges from these considerations about some interpretation of Arendt's banality of evil, it worth noticing, she would have liked us to focus on the kind of agent who should contribute to political life, namely a person capable of an inner moral dialogue. Certainly, according to her, this is not the kind of agent who only obeys orders given by others or, echoing what Mosse's critique highlighted, a person who acts because they are ensnared by propaganda.

In Arendt's view, critical thinking which results into political action takes place in solitude and requires that, once formulated, thoughts must come to light in the form of judgement and be compared with those of others who share the same public realm, namely other just citizens who want to contribute to the common good (Arendt 2003)⁹. When Arendt proposed her definition of the 'banality of evil' and discussed the miserable conditions to which prisoners in the camps were subjected, she wanted to invite to reflect on the importance of questioning those principles that are detrimental to others. According to her, only by trying to act according to morally correct principles with respect for others will it be possible to avoid catastrophic events such as those that occurred during totalitarianism. This will be possible, since people would be invited to follow good moral principle safeguarding the good of others as well.

What is objectionable about her vision is that it is decidedly optimistic, describing agents who are predisposed to perform morally correct actions for the good of others; people who take an interest in the political sphere and actively participate in the construction of the public good. However, it should not be forgotten that people who take part in public life could not always aim at the common good. Some – like Eichmann did, for example, find themselves taking part in political decisions without having firm and correct moral principles.

Nevertheless, the one of Arendt is still an interesting reflection because she openly criticises all those who would act in a public context without having a value system that is respectful of correct moral principles and of the other fellow citizens (Arendt 2003). Her reflections show agents who want to actively participate to the public life and their political actions could be considered truly democratic, in the broader sense of respecting the opinion of their fellows and seeking a common good (Arendt 1998)¹⁰.

Conclusions

The analysis carried out had shown how two authoritative sources tried to explain a tragic historical moment of the 20th century that led to an in-depth reflection on responsibility of individuals, and also on people's inability to critically

⁹For a more in-depth discussion of the concept of judgment in Arendt, see Steinberger (1990) and Palazzi (2015).

¹⁰For a critical account of Arendt's democracy, see for example, Wolin (1983).

think and act accordingly to their values. Arendt and Mosse were similar in considering the role of racism during the Nazi's regime and in emphasising that – for both – racism was a component extensively exploited by the Nazi regime to produce the right conditions for the dehumanisation of those who were interned in concentration camps. Furthermore, Mosse's critique of Arendt was the opportunity to shed light on the internal debate among those who studied these issues in the years following these tragical facts.

On a methodological level, the choice to compare these two of the main sources who discuss the same facts was intended to contribute to help the reader in engaging a thinking activity which can be defined as 'philosophical' in the sense of critical and plural, capable of grasping different nuances of the same issue. As Arendt tries to explain when she criticizes Eichmann, this way of proceeding allows one to think thanks to an enlarged mentality (Arendt 1987)¹¹, i.e., a mentality capable of accepting methods other than one's own to investigate facts or even certain ethical-political issues. Therefore, the choice of showing how Mosse and Arendt discusses the main issues concerning totalitarianism and their attempt to identify the causes of this tragic and dark moment in history should serve as a more general example of how philosophy conceived as an investigation method should be. That is an attempt to look at the same issue from different perspectives, in a multifaceted manner. For example, starting with Mosse's critique of Arendt, it was possible to investigate the concept of responsibility and critical thinking, considering them in a more in-depth and multifaceted way. This approach is the one that could be proposed as a method to investigate historically, socially, ethically, and politically important issues, so that people can acquire a capacity for democratic interaction, where the word 'democratic' means a certain ability to understand the points of view of others, trying to find a mediation between the parties, fully respecting the interlocutors who intervene and are involved in the debate.

Of course, a thorny question remains open, specifically the one which concerns the kind of agent Arendt thinks could contribute to the constructive dialogue which represents the good model of political interaction. It should be emphasised that, in her view, only those who have good moral principles should take part in the debate aiming at a common good. In this way, Arendt would seem to exclude some people from this constructive debate. Namely, she would leave out people who were unable to critically think, to be able to choose the correct, respectful values that make them worthy of participation in public debate. While this is Arendt's perspective, one could optimistically try to think of approaching a further goal. Specifically, that of engaging people with points of view other than their own in a more open dialogue, teaching them to exercise, from an early age, the ability to listen and compare; using, for example, as it already happens in many institutions, the debate method at school. Hannah Arendt's reflection is not the only one in the history of the contemporary philosophical-political thought to conceive the public dimension as a sphere of dialogical and respectful exchange, in which people who do not democratically want to participate may be excluded. Therefore, the thorny

¹¹For a more in-depth discussion of the concept of 'enlarged mentality' in Arendt, see Moynag (1997).

issue seems to remain without a solution. However, a possible one seems conceivable, again referring to the philosopher's thought. It worth noticing, that Arendt's reflections on the Ancients allows us to link her critique of those who do not critically think to that method she considers to be the foundation of democratic thought, namely the dialogue with oneself and with others¹². Indeed, in her view, those who think in such a way as to preserve other lives and thoughts, avail some Socratic principles evoked in Plato's *Gorgias* (482b-c): they are useful to understand what she conceives as deeply think to a good and just system of values. These principles require not to commit injustice actions and to always act according to a correct value system and respectful of others.

Thanks to these considerations we can understand why dialogue could be a kind of method suitable to build up a respectful participation in political life, and a method that can be taught and learnt, thus extending the possibility of taking part in the political debate itself. Through dialogue with themselves, people can imagine different situations and values that might guide their actions; they can achieve a certain level of identification, thinking about what other people's thoughts might be. This imaginative capacity allows them to think about what value systems should be practiced in the political realm, which value systems are characterized by non-violent outcomes and allow a democratic exchange of opinions (Arendt 1989). For example, even at school, by having people actively participate in debates, from a very young age, they could be encouraged to look at an issue from several points of view and learn to respect their peers for their positions without using violent means to resolve a conflict.

This may just be a wish for the future, but perhaps it would be worth investing more in the study and analysis of those philosophers or thinkers who have been able to suggest non-violent methods to resolve ethical and political issues. It would be important to analyse reflections that can make people critically think about issues of public interest and make them more open to accepting suggestions from others who share the same interest in improving the public common space.

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¹²For some considerations on the role of dialogue among those who participate to a rational discourse in the political sphere, so those *who want* to take an active part in a *democratic and constructive dialogue* see, e.g., Habermas (1996).

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